



ABIDING IN CHRIST,  
ABOUNDING IN HOPE

DECEMBER 2006/JANUARY 2007

SECTION B

# VOICES & VISIONS

## Celebrating New Vitality, New Visions and New Churches

### Comma Connections: A New Way to Do Church

Birthing new churches in the Southeast Conference is taking an interesting twist. With membership on the decline in every mainline denomination, it is time to start thinking outside of the box.

"Some people in our communities are turned off by traditional Sunday morning churches," said Rev. Cameron Trimble, the SEC Minister of Evangelism and Church Development. "They have been wounded or burned out in their churches and are now looking for alternatives. They want something different — a spiritual community without the buildings, parking lots, and hierarchical structure. Many are looking for spiritual communities focused on celebration, discipleship and social justice,"

Some questions being considered at the SEC:

- What would happen if we stopped trying to create "churches" and instead tried to create "community"?
- What would happen if we stopped trying to create "church members" and instead tried to create "disciples"?
- What would happen if we stopped trying to "build buildings" and instead tried to "build relationships"?

We remember in the Gospels that when Jesus commissioned the disciples and sent them out into the world, he did not tell them to "go build churches." Rather, he commissioned them to "build disciples" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Comma Connections are an imaginative step in that direction. Comma Connections are alternative spiritual communities focused on creating opportunities and environments for authentic, intimate, meaningful spiritual connections to God and fellow sojourners through worship (celebration), discipleship (growth) and community service (shalom).

Each group — numbering between 12 and 50 people — gathers for the express purpose of forming an intimate spiritual community guided by progressive theology committed to the UCC ideals of radical hospitality and welcome of all people.

Comma Connections can be developed and led in any number of ways. They can self-designate an ordained clergy or in-care student to organize and lead them. The groups can rotate leadership responsibilities as the group develops. They can meet in people's homes, the local coffeehouse, restaurant, theater, or wherever. The meeting times and locations are to be determined by the local group. The structure is intentionally flexible allowing for creativity to meet the needs of the participants.

Most importantly, Comma Connections have one purpose — to reach people who might not set foot in a traditional church but long for a spiritual community. The group might one day decide that it wants to be a "church," at which point they will go before the Church and Ministry committee with that request, or they may decide that they want to stay as a Comma Connection.



A group of leaders is beginning the journey of putting this ministry model into practice, using Atlanta as the first test environment.

"We have a strong group of creative men and women who have committed to meet once a week for eight weeks as we engage in prayer and discernment," Rev. Trimble said. "After this period of discernment, we will start groups around Atlanta and see where this leads us"

Comma Connections are about planting seeds and seeing what God can do with them. If you are interested in leading or participating in one of these groups, contact Rev. Cameron Trimble at [ctrimble@secucc.org](mailto:ctrimble@secucc.org). More information is also available online at [www.secucc.org](http://www.secucc.org).

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The members of Sandy Creek UCC at the service where the newest church in the Southeast Conference was received into the United Church of Christ.

"I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT UPON ALL . . .  
AND YOUR YOUNG SHALL SEE VISIONS AND  
YOUR OLD SHALL DREAM DREAMS."

ACTS 2:17

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# Peace Passes On, Among People and Among Faiths

Dear Friends,

We journey through Advent with anticipation in our hearts as we sing "O come, O come Emmanuel" longing for a peace that seems so distant.

Our headlines cry out of wars and rumors of wars. A litany of names rolls before our eyes — Iraq, Darfur, Sri

Lanka, Southern Thailand, North Korea, and so many more.

Although our headlines can overwhelm us, there are peacemakers in our midst, people who work quietly and unnoticed bringing hope into the shadows of despair. I recently had the honor of sitting in the presence of two such peacemakers. Their coming together

was serendipity, or perhaps the work of the Holy Spirit.

I was in Sunday worship at Pleasant Hill Community UCC. The preacher was Mark Tamthai, with us in the Southeast

Conference to teach us how to be "makers of just peace."

Mark has been working in heavily conflicted Southern Thailand working with Buddhists and Muslims.

In his sermon he spoke as a Christian peacemaker in a non-Christian setting. He acts as a mirror to Buddhists — reflecting to them the words of the Buddha — and with the Muslims — reflecting the teachings of Muhammad. His is a ministry of listening and reflection.

I found myself deeply moved as he recounted the particular vocation of a Christian peace maker in the midst of a violent and terrifying insurgency.

Later in the worship service there was a time of commemorating the life of Aiko Carter, who had died the week before. The commemoration was led by her husband Tony and her daughter

Amy. Aiko and Tony had served as UCC missionaries to Japan.

Aiko also was a Christian peacemaker in a non-Christian setting, drawing on her roots in a Buddhist culture to add dimension and understanding to the ways in which she lived out her faith. She was an advocate for women's rights. She was particularly passionate about women victimized and used by the sex industries of Asia.

By the end of the service, I found myself in tears at the connections between these two voices, Aiko's and Mark's, which emerged, unplanned and unintended. Both sought to help the voiceless find voice, to be an advocate

for those "who dwell in deep darkness" that "on them, light may shine" to be people who had the audacity to hope in settings where there seemed to be room only for despair.

Following the worship service a friend of Aiko's who had come for the memorial said to Mark, "I felt as if I was listening to the voice of Aiko as you spoke."

And so the work of peace continues in another.

As our Advent journey leads us toward the cradle in which our hope lies fragile and tender, may we each find ways to be peacemakers, to reach out to those "who mourn in lonely exile here."

It is not only the Christ who is our light, but the light of Christ in those around us and in ourselves which shines in the shadowed corners.

May the Peace of God Be with You,  
*Timothy Downs*  
 Conference Minister

"GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE . . ."

FROM THE  
CONFERENCE  
MINISTER



## Concerns and Celebrations

■ We have received word from **Rev. Budd Friend-Jones**, who has begun a new pastorate at First Congregational UCC in Crystal Lake, Ill., outside of Chicago. Before leaving his position as pastor of **Central Congregational UCC** in Atlanta, Budd was honored with two awards: The John Houston Allen Humanitarian Award from the Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasters, and the Practitioner of Excellence Award from the Health and Human Services Conference.

■ The book, *Solomon's Success, Four Essential Keys to Leadership*, published by Pilgrim Press and authored by **Rev. Kenneth L. Samuel, Pastor of Victory UCC** in Stone Mountain, Ga., will be released in November.



Rev. Kenneth L. Samuel

■ **Jim Deming** has been called as interim minister to **First United Church UCC** in Nashville, Tenn., starting on Oct. 2. Jim holds ministerial standing in the Alabama-Tennessee Association.

■ **Janice Mynchenberg**, a rostered pastor of the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA, has been appointed as interim minister of **Pilgrim Congregational UCC** in Chattanooga, Tenn. She started in October. She will be seeking dual standing in the Alabama-Tennessee Association.

■ **Philip Price** has been called as interim minister of **Central Congregational UCC** in Atlanta beginning on Dec. 11. He has ministerial standing in the Georgia-South Carolina Association. He currently serves as an interim minister in a Disciples congregation in Watkinsville, Ga.

■ Congratulations to **Susan Rice** who was approved for ordination on Oct. 20 pending a call by an Ecclesiastical Council of the Alabama-Tennessee Association. Susan is a member of Beloved Community UCC in Birmingham, Ala., and has completed seminary.

■ The Georgia-South Carolina Association Church and Ministry Committee took the following actions at its meeting on Oct. 14: **Darin Easler** an ordained minister of the ELCA was granted privilege of call; **Graciela Flores** and **Karen Mann** were approved for recommendation to Ecclesiastical Council on Nov. 4 for ordination pending a call and a review of their psychological evaluations; and **Alan Roof** has been recommended to Ecclesiastical Council for ordination.

■ Congratulations to **Dorinda Broadnax** and **Michael Garrett** on the occasion of graduating from the Theology Among the People (TAP) program after three years of study. Dorinda is an associate minister on the staff of **Community Congregational UCC** in Montgomery, Ala., and Michael serves as pastor of **First Congregational UCC** in Montgomery, Ala.

■ **Laurie Robins**, chaplain at North Atlanta Tri-Hospital CPE Center and member of **Central Congregational UCC** in Atlanta, announced the September birth of her daughter, **Lynn Blanch Robins**. Mother Laurie and baby Lynn (6.12 pounds) are well.

■ We were saddened at the resignation of **Kathy Robinson Nelson** from the Executive Council of the UCC and the Board of Directors of the Southeast Conference due to health problems. Kathy is pastor of **Plymouth Congregational UCC** in Charleston, S.C.

■ **Tom Eckert**, pastor of **United Church UCC** in Cookeville, Tenn., shared that he has completed radiation

treatment for cancer of the throat, and the prognosis going forward is very good. He expressed his thanks for all the support he has received.

■ **Dorinda Broadnax**, associate minister at **Community Congregational UCC** in Montgomery, Ala., underwent surgery to replace a heart valve on Oct. 20. She is recuperating at home for several weeks.

■ We were saddened by the news of the death of **Aiko Carter** in October. Aiko was retired from mission work in Japan at Uplands and a member of **Pleasant Hill Community UCC**. Aiko is survived by her husband Tony, and a daughter and son.

## VOICES & VISIONS

Voices & Visions, the Southeast Conference United Church of Christ section of the United Church News (USPS 764-070) is published six times a year. Its mission is to promote current events and conference news, offering information and inspiration to members. Views expressed in editorials, letters, and signed columns are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official Conference or UCC policies.

### Southeast Conference United Church of Christ

1330 West Peachtree Street,  
Suite #344  
Atlanta, GA 30309

Phone: 404-607-1993  
800-807-1993 (outside Atlanta)  
Fax: 404-607-7939  
www.seucc.org

Editor:  
Michael Cheek  
Contributing Editor:  
Timothy C. Downs  
Article ideas and submissions  
may be directed to the Editor.



## Association Church and Ministry Committees Train to Conduct Fitness Review

ATLANTA — Inaugurating a new season of collaboration in training together, 17 members of the Alabama-Tennessee, East Alabama-West Georgia and Georgia-South Carolina Associations' Church and Ministry Committees gathered on Sept. 15 and 16 to hear about, read about, think about and talk about the difficult subject of conducting fitness reviews for clergy.

When allegations are leveled against a clergy person that, if true, would call into question his or her fitness for ministry in and on behalf of the UCC, the committees will engage in a review of fitness for ministry.

We were ably led in this training by Rev. Lynn Bujnak from the Office of Parish Life and Leadership.

Just as we do not introduce the topic of sexual ethics to youngsters

when they're locked in a passionate embrace, so we cannot begin considerations of clergy misconduct in the midst of the charges and counter-charges and heightened feelings that allegations of clergy misconduct generate.

During our several hours together, we considered such questions as when to conduct a fitness review, what are the procedures are (which we reviewed step by step), who has which role (and no one has two), and other matters that led us into the gray areas and complexities of the process. Working with case studies, we talked about what constitutes misconduct in sometimes ambiguous circumstances, how issues of power and authority are central to clergy relationships, and more. We also spent considerable time discussing how to handle the pastoral

considerations for everyone involved in a fitness review, from the pastor being reviewed to the ones bringing the complaint to their families, to the church(es) involved to the review committee itself.

The group was grateful to the Southeast Conference and the national Office of Parish Life and Leadership for providing this outstanding training.

"The event demonstrated the seriousness with which the United Church of Christ takes the fitness of its ministers for ministry," said Dale Owen, a participant. "While fitness reviews may deal with complex issues and complicated situations, the United Church of Christ has clear guidelines and processes in place for addressing these concerns. In addition to the written guidelines and procedures, the

United Church of Christ also has excellent resources at the national level to assist associations in this important work."

Though all of us hope we will never have to put the training into practice, we know that we are prepared to work together in even very difficult circumstances to seek truth in a structure of justice and fairness for all concerned.

"The Southeast Conference in recent years has taken the matter of the psychological, ethical, spiritual and profession fitness for ministry of authorized ministers with the utmost seriousness," said Conference Minister Tim Downs. "It is not a matter of simply clergy 'behaving well.' We seek to create communities in our congregations where all are safe from the abuse and misuses of power. In the end, this is a matter of justice."

## CONFERENCE NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS



Dr. Mark Tamthai and Rev. Tim Downs

- The Presbytery of Greater Atlanta and the Southeast Conference co-sponsored the visit of **Dr. Mark Tamthai**, a part of the International Peacemaker Church (USA) in the first week of October. In addition, a two-day convocation for both UCC and PCUSA members, was held at **Church of the Savior** in Roswell, Ga. Mark also visited **Pleasant Hill Community UCC** in Tennessee. His visit marked the planning of a three-week, inter-faith immersion experience for Theology Among the People (TAP) participants and clergy. The experience is planned for the winter of 2008.

- The Southeast Conference in its continuing work to assist evacuees from Hurricane Katrina. A scholarship of more than \$2,000 was provided to a young mother from Louisiana who is enrolled in Talladega College.

- While this is not strictly speaking SEC news, we have heard of the action of the Boards of Directors of the Justice and Witness Ministries and Local Church Ministries to not approve proceeding with the restructuring of the UCC as it came before them in October. John Gill of the JWM board noted that the board felt that it could not proceed without fur-

ther conversation and clarity and assurances that the justice work of the UCC would not be compromised. Sarah Kim, our delegate to the LCM Board of Directors, reported the same. The implications of these actions are unclear at this time.

- The conference has received letters of thanks for its financial support of the Chicago, United and Eden (CUE) Seminaries in the amount of \$2,000; and Elon Homes for Children in the amount of \$130.

- **United Church of Cookeville UCC** in Tennessee Announced that they have initiated an ad campaign in the local cultural newspaper. The church also hired a new minister of music, **Randy Hooper**. They have received four new members, bringing their membership to a total of 40.

- **United Church of Huntsville UCC** in Alabama is the proud recipient of a grant from the national offices of the UCC to support their ad campaign, organized to promote their identity as a Still Speaking congregation. They have advertised actively on television, and in print, and have taken in a significant number of new members as a result of the campaign.

- **Oakgrove Congregational Christian UCC** in Pine Mountain, Ga., has enrolled as a Still Speaking Church and is beginning to explore ways to advertise their presence in their neighborhood.

*Your feedback and input are welcome. Rev. Tim Downs Conference Minister [tdowns@secucc.org](mailto:tdowns@secucc.org)*

## New to the UCC, We Welcome Garden of Grace

COLUMBIA, S.C. — The United Church of Christ officially welcomed the people of Garden of Grace on Sunday, Oct. 15. Conference Minister Rev. Tim Downs and Rev. Cameron Trimble attended the worship.

The Georgia-South Carolina Association had voted in April to officially receive the church and this worship service was a recognition of this action. Following the service, the congregation gathered for a potluck Hawaiian luau.

Garden of Grace UCC is a congregation of 150 members, and moved into a new building earlier this year. Their pastor is Rev. Andy Sidden, who was ordained in the Universal

Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. He is currently seeking ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ. Their associate pastor is Candace Chellew, who is also seeking UCC standing.

Garden of Grace UCC is a part of the Nehemiah Initiative strategy in the Southeast Conference, which has four foci:

- Traditional new church development
- Comma Connections
- Churches birthing churches
- Affiliating churches.

Garden of Grace is one of three existing congregations that has affiliated with the United Church of Christ during 2006. As an affiliating church, Garden of Grace embarked on a time of exploration of covenant with the Conference that took more than a year.

Following study and discernment involving all the Conference staff and the Church and Ministry Committee of the Association, Garden of Grace chose to seek affiliation with the UCC. The congregation will also be exploring the possibility of beginning a Theology Among the People (TAP) class shortly.

Garden of Grace becomes the third UCC congregation in South Carolina. The other two — Circular Congregational Church and Plymouth Congregational UCC — were established in 1681 and 1867 respectively. The church represents the leading edge of the growing vitality of the UCC in the South.



## Southeast Conference Staff Welcomes General Minister and President John Thomas to Atlanta Ecumenical Gathering

ATLANTA — The Southeast Conference staff hosted the semi-annual luncheon of the judicatory staffs in the Atlanta area of the Formula of Agreement partners and the United Methodists on Oct. 19.

The Formula of Agreement is an agreement that draws the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church of America, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America into ecumenical partnership. The UCC General Minister and President John Thomas led the discussion.

In these contentious times in our lives as denominations, we are all seeking to live in creative covenant with our members and congregations, often in the midst of deeply felt differences. Rev. Thomas spoke about the process of discerning faithful and constructive critics from those critics who are not seeking the good of the whole.

Rev. Thomas said that many across the theological spec-



Rev. John Thomas

trum care for the denominations of which they are a part and who seek to build them up in love. There are others in the midst of all of our denominations who neither understand nor seek to be the "loyal opposition."

He noted that there are groups outside of our mainline traditions who have significant funding from conservative foundations and other right-wing interests, many of which are aligned with neo-conservative political agendas. Their presence is felt in the lives of our denominations largely through dissident groups on the right that describe themselves as bodies set to "reform or renew the church for the renewal of democracy."

Our challenge remains to be careful not to throw together all dissident voices into one oppositional screech. Instead, we should seek to foster an environment of civil discourse and welcome to a diversity of perspectives.

## Celebrating New Vitality

*Continued from page B1*

### CONFERENCE ASSOCIATIONS GATHER FOR FALL MEETINGS

The three Associations of the Southeast Conference — Georgia-South Carolina, Alabama-Tennessee, and East Alabama-West Georgia — held their fall meetings in October. Here is a summary of each meeting:

#### Georgia-South Carolina Association

Choosing as its theme "Equipping the Saints," the Georgia-South Carolina Association gathered to invite congregations to share the ways in which each have sought to build their ministry. The meeting was held Oct. 14 at Virginia-Highland Church (A Baptist and UCC Congregation).

Stories were shared of mission and ministry, followed by a PowerPoint presentation introducing the work of the Southeast Conference through Rev. Cameron Trimble and Rev. Kathy Clark.

Rev. Kimberleigh Buchanan, moderator of the association, asked, "Can these bones live?" She spoke to us as the ligaments that moved the bones and knit them together. Thoughts were shared about ways in which the association could be a part of holding the ligaments together and fostering collaboration.

Rev. Rebeca Nanjesse Canganjo, a pastor of the Evangelical Congregational Church of Angola, a partner in mission with the United Church of Christ, spoke to us of the devastation of Angola by 27 years of warfare. She spoke of role of the church as a source of hope in this time of rebuilding and expressed her deep thanks for all that the United Church of Christ and its congregations had made possible through their prayers and giving.

#### Alabama-Tennessee Association

The Alabama-Tennessee Association gathered at the Pleasant Hill Community United Church of Christ in Pleasant Hill, Tenn., on Oct. 20 and 21. Dr. Paul Sherry, past president of the United Church of Christ, was the featured keynoter, presenting his work with the National Council of Churches promoting the abolition of poverty and the adoption of a new minimum wage.

The association also gathered as an Ecclesiastical Council to exam and approve Susan Rice for ordination to



The Alabama-Tennessee Association meeting included a home-churned ice cream social, hosted by the Pleasant Hill Tennis Club.

Christian ministry. The gathering was a time of great fellowship, including an ice cream social with home-churned ice cream, hosted by the Pleasant Hill Tennis Club.

#### East Alabama-West Georgia Association

The East Alabama-West Georgia Association gathered for its Annual Meeting at Oak Grove Congregational Christian UCC in Pine Mountain, Ga., on Oct. 21. The meeting was a time of new beginnings as the association elected a new moderator, Don Harmon, a member of Lanett Congregational Christian UCC.

The meeting received reports from all of its member congregations: United Congregational Christian Church in Columbus, Ga.; Lanett Congregational Christian Church; Jones Chapel; Woodbury; and Oak Grove.

The association received into UCC membership the newest church in the Southeast Conference, Sandy Creek UCC. Their pastor is Wayne Washburn. Sandy Creek worships at the Allen Retreat Center in Lafayette, Ala. The 15 members of Sandy Creek UCC are people from area congregations that have withdrawn from the UCC. The church has committed to be a Covenant Keeper and Five-for-Five congregation.

## CONFERENCE CALENDAR

**Nov. 27-29, 2006**

Cabinet of Council of Conference Ministers  
Orlando, Fla.

**Nov. 29-30, 2006**

Council of Conference Ministers  
Orlando, Fla.

**Nov. 30-Dec. 4, 2006**

Search and Call Gathering  
Orlando, Fla.

**Dec. 6, 2006**

Conference Personnel Committee  
Conference Office, Atlanta

**Dec. 8, 2006**

Conference Staff and Alumni  
Christmas Party  
Atlanta

**Dec. 9, 2006**

Georgia-South Carolina Church  
and Ministry Committee  
Conference Office, Atlanta

**Dec. 10, 2006**

Service of Reception into the UCC  
Sandy Creek UCC,  
Lafayette, AL

**Dec. 12, 2006**

Atlanta Area Judicatory Staff  
Gathering  
First Presbyterian Church,  
Atlanta

**Dec. 22, 2006-Jan. 2, 2007**

Conference Office Closed

*For additional information on any calendar event, contact Tim Downs at [tdowns@secucc.org](mailto:tdowns@secucc.org) or call the conference office at 404-607-1993, or outside the Atlanta area at 1-800-807-1993. For additional information on the Southeast Conference and a complete calendar of activities, visit the web site at [www.seucc.org](http://www.seucc.org).*

